Profile:

by Alice Wallace

Sara Kathryn Arledge

There is a sense of imaginative rightness in an artist because there is rightness in the Universe...a complex harmony. What it seems to me that I am doing is to create images in such a way as to try to tenderly communicate this sense of rightness to others.

--Sara Kathryn Arledge

Straw hat perched on top of abundant black hair, a mite too small for the luxuriant crown, but jauntily holding its own; recalcitrant ear protruding through dark strands; youthful face with alabaster skin and sloe eyes--but look again, this is no romanticized image.

The wry twist to the mouth, the multiple Adam's apples on the trifle-too-long neck, the sly look in the beautiful eyes reveal the painting for what it is: A caricature of the artist, Sara Kathryn Arledge, as a young woman, captured on canvas by a long-ago boyfriend when she was an art student at the Barnes Foundation in Philadelphia.

Arledge went on to become an early pioneer in experimental filmmaking, and on October 2 the Pasadena Filmforum will present a retrospective of her films. On the same day, a month-long exhibit of her paintings and slides will open at Aarnun Art Gallery and Picture Framing, 99 E. Colorado Blvd. in Pasadena.

Sara Arledge lives in the same house in Pasadena she lived in as a child, over 60 years ago. At 67, the hair is gray, still springy, but cut so that no stubborn ear pokes out. The face emanates a vibrancy similar to that depicted in the painting of the young artist, which hangs in the living room near the front door. The years have brought a seemingly disproportionate amount of personal tragedy (loss of an only child by suicide, confinements in a state mental hospital), but they haven't diminished the vitality of an original and independent spirit--qualities consistently characteristic of her art.

As a young painter and sculptor, Arledge was looking for a way to portray "time in art." She was intrigued with the possibilities of the film medium and began production of her first experimental film, INTROSPECTION, in 1941.

She chose dance as the subject because "dancers were mobile objects that moved through space." The intent was to create a dance that could only be shown on film, a choreography uniquely different from any devised for the stage, one that emerged solely from the explicit conventions of the medium.

Viewing the film some 30 years after it was completed, one is astonished at the sustaining originality, vitality, and technical innovation of the production. And, perhaps most importantly, the beauty, the beauty of the visual movement--time in art, art that moves. Arledge comments that it's not the film she started out to make. Like most new filmmakers, her initial enthusiasm called for a production that would have "intimidated Cecil B. DeMille," involving, among other ideas, live lions romping across the screen. The lions had to go.

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At a time (1941) when there were few, if any cinematography schools, Arledge worked out the technical aspects to achieve the effects she wanted. By blacking out the background (she said she bought everything black she could find in second-hand stores) and photographing white against black with colored stage gels covering the camera lens, she was able to produce color. She also created the effect of dismembered forms moving through space by blacking out parts of the dancers' bodies.

Part of the financing came from money she was able to save while working as a substitute art teacher with the Los Angeles and Pasadena school systems. A friend offered use of a studio (on Saturday nights only) and the crew and actors worked free, except for the tacos she bought them from the Mexican restaurant below the studio.

Completed in 1946, INTROSPECTION had a premiere showing at the San Francisco Museum of Art in 1947 as part of the Art in Cinema series coordinated by Frank Stauffacher. It received wide critical acclaim. Film historian Lew Jacobs wrote at the time: "Markedly different in approach, technique and style from the pictures of the other non-objectivists is the film by Sara Arledge called Introspection....The problem of flatness of the screen which reduces the dancer to a two-dimensional figure was overcome by an ingenious use of a wide angle lens, convex reflecting surface, special lighting effects, slow motion and multiple exposures. The result is a kind of abstraction and a completely new visual experience....The use of color is striking and unlike color in any other experiment thus far."

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Arledge wrote and produced a satirical film called WHAT IS A MAN? during the 1950's while she was at Berkeley. According to filmmaker Shirley Clarke, WHAT IS A MAN? is a "sophisticated, humorous exploration of the experimental film medium."

It's not a film for the passive viewer. Its themes embody change and alienation between the sexes and between individuals and society. The filmmaker says she attempted to show that "in spite of human folly, all is right with the Cosmos. The everchanging details about Eve, Adam, and their offspring in this world contrasted with the Timeless Universal Being."

WHAT IS A MAN? had never been shown to the public until November 1976, when Terry Cannon at the Pasadena Filmforum "discovered" Sara Arledge and showed a retrospective of her work. The avant-garde film community has responded with interest and enthusiasm to the work of this earliest of experimental film artists. One of the reasons given for her obscurity is that Arledge chose to stay on the West Coast instead of going to New York which was considered the center of experimentation in the arts. Another reason, wryly adhered to by Arledge, is that male artists have wives who go around promoting their work, and what she needed was a wife, since, she observed, husbands don't tend to perform this service.

Other films that will be shown at the October 2 exhibit are film sequences of artistic 3¼ x 4 glass slides that Arledge has been painting since the late 1940's. The slides comprise two or more glass plates with the paintings sandwiched between them to create specific effects. Many different mediums are used in the color slides: stage light gels, glass paints, India ink and Sharpie pens. The black, white and sepia ones are created by smoking the glass with matches and using a toothpick to draw fine white lines in the soot.

Filmmaker Chick Strand, on seeing the Arledge slides in the film INTERIOR GARDEN II, said: "A magical original piece from a pioneer experimentalist, a marvelous new technique and powerful perspective into the heart of the poet."

When asked what period of her life she enjoyed the most, Sara Arledge named the present, pointing out that she used to be easily crushed by criticism of her work but now feels secure in herself. She said she's making new friends, enjoying recognition of her work, and is busy making plans to produce more films. In May 1979, she's planning a trip to New York City where her films will be shown at the Anthology Film Archives.

Arledge observed that young filmmakers today have the advantage of film schools and workshops but, as she relates what Shirley Clarke said to her ("I'm jealous of you because you were in it at the beginning"), Sara Kathryn Arledge smiles her satisfaction at this acknowledgement from her peers. □